MUSEI VATICANI

Mostra

DIVINE CREATURE

23 gennaio - 3 marzo 2018

The Sacred Story and the Paths of the Visible

There are numerous aspects making up the "Divine Creatures" exhibition project, which we have willingly embraced and curated, together with Adamo Antonacci and Silvia Garutti, specially for the edition hosted in the Vatican Museums, after its initial presentation at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence in 2017.

What is immediately striking is the decision to select ten paintings taken from the history of Italian art between the 16th and 20th centuries to tell of episodes of the birth, the Passion and the death of Christ. Antonello da Messina, Mantegna, Rosso Fiorentino, Titian, Caravaggio, Gherardo delle Notti, Cigoli, Ciseri and Montanari. Their compositions are the 'texts' that provide the starting-point to arrive at the heart of the idea: they have been the script, the *canovaccio*, to create the same number of photographic re-productions. And to do this, the 'actors', those who have been given the delicate task of giving face, body and expression to the characters of the sacred story, interpreting the forms and intentions conceived by the various artists, are men, women, youngsters and children with disabilities. Finally, an extraordinary operational machine – coordinated by Adamo Antonacci, together with the director of photography Leonardo Baldini, and with set designers, make-up artists, costume designers, lighting technicians, above all supported by the families of the protagonists of this adventure and by the Stranemani International production house – has given life to the work of realisation, also placing the multi-faceted, creative, original role, by no means neutral or mechanical, of the technological means of shooting the photographs on the table of the reflection.

Such elements, summarily gathered together, very clearly contain questions of a diverse and complex nature, at the same time ethical and spiritual, social and cultural, anthropological and aesthetic.

The art of the 20th and 21st centuries has often measured itself against works symbolising the history of images, with that boundless baggage of visual memory marking eras, styles, languages, embracing methods of narration, systems of perception, spiritual and poetic horizons, social contexts and cultural perspectives. The goals with which the artists have approached this 'different repetition' – I am borrowing the expression from an essay by Renato Barilli from 1974, who in turn remoulds Deleuze's – this exercise of rewriting the iconographic materials and the aesthetic imagery belonging to the history of art, are many and very diverse. Without entering into the merits of reworkings that have now taken their place in history – such as de Chirico's exercises, Duchamp's famous *Mona Lisa* or Picasso's variations on the masterpieces

of Velázquez, Goya or Manet – the more recent experimentations range from the 'masked' affirmation of one's own identity in a chameleonic artist such as Cindy Sherman, who photographs herself disguised as historical-artistic characters, to the search for a timelessness in the photographic series "Portraits" by Hiroshi Sugimoto, re-creations of wax manikins that are in turn copies of ancient paintings, to that of the suspended, almost free-diving worldliness of Bill Viola's video installations, inspired by the works of the Florentine Renaissance.

These are just a few of the more famous examples of the inevitable and always existing process of rereading, reinterpreting, appropriating – and therefore of alteration and transformation of the original source – of an artistic heritage that knows no geographical or chronological barriers, constantly keeping itself active and fertile in being able to contaminate and be contaminated by the mutable present.

Despite the diversity of their aesthetic intentions and content, the three examples cited are linked by the production medium with which the artists give life to this interaction with the images of the past, that is, the mechanic, instrumental medium of the camera or video lens.

It is a procedure that envisages a re-staging through the involvement of characters-actors and a clever and meticulous work of production and post production, in order to go back over the historical 'text', knowingly loaded with the responsibilities, ethical rather than aesthetic, of the present. The result has nothing to do with an overlap, a repetition, least of all a falsification of the image. In the famous volume from 1980, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes, reflecting on the citing of a work of art in a photographic composition, defines it as an *air*, which "is not a simple analogy … as is likeness", because it is animated, rendered vital and real by the physical presence of people. It is perhaps here that one of the fundamental and founding cores of the project "Divine Creatures" lies. The photographic reinterpretation of the painted works, which tell of the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Passion, the Death, the Transporting to the sepulchre and the first apparition of the body of Christ in the Supper at Emmaus, is not striking because it is the same as the original, but precisely because, even though harkening back to it, it presents unique, authentic characteristics, which are not resolvable in the comparison with the model. Our "face-to-face" confrontation with the photographic work poses the question of the relationship between expression and truth, between eye and gaze, between past and present.

In his *Short History of Photography* (1931), Walter Benjamin cites an extract from an article from the late 19th century published in German magazine *Leipziger Stadtanzeiger*, which is highly critical of that diabolical French invention. The arguments are very interesting: "To try to catch transient reflected images is not merely something that is impossible, but, as a thorough German investigation has shown, the very desire to do so is blasphemy. Man is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be captured by any human machine". Only the "divine artist" and his hands are authorised to render the human-divine features. In highlighting the anachronism of such a condemnation, Benjamin adds an essential note, namely that art only fears evolution and progress and is distrustful of transformations and technological developments when it feels its end is drawing near.

The photographic works created for "Divine Creatures" on one hand verify the extraordinary communicative and expressive power of the images borrowed from the history of art, the solidity of their specific aesthetic essence, which the photographic reconstruction does not call into question, although it involves their isolation from the context, modifies it with their real dimensions and the

inevitable annulling of their original texture; on the other, what they deliver to our gaze, to our attention, is a new image, an authentic, unprecedented, topical version of the sacred story. This is possible thanks to the commitment, the dedication and the work of the protagonists, of the boys and girls who act, feel, live the Gospel scene. It is precisely their presence, 'made in God's image', that modifies and intensifies every attitude, every gesture, every expression, embodying the Word, giving new value and proclaiming the urgency of the dialogue between the sacred story and our time.

The path along which this dialogue has taken shape has required the involvement of expert professionals and a meticulous and knowledgeable direction, capable of calibrating the role and the objectives to be achieved through the use of the photographic medium. Because one of the most interesting aspects of the project we are presenting, from the technological point of view, concerns the fact that we are not dealing with *tableaux vivants*, in other words, the simple recording of a perfect reconstruction of the painted scene by the camera. Only the complex, delicate work of composition, lighting, make-up and post-production, an integral and inseparable part of the creative process, makes images visible that our eyes would perceive as completely different on the set. For this reason, we have chosen to 'complete' the presentation of the photographic works not only with the backstage photographs, but also by adding some of the stage objects: some crockery, a lectern, the crown of thorns, the whip, the angel's wings, the lute. Visitors can verify the simplicity, the poverty of colours or materials, the illusion of volume, compared to the final result: somewhat partial evidence of the lengthy work of reconstruction and interpretation that each painting has required, but also of how misleading the idea of the photograph as a mere act of recording of reality can still be today.

The sole exception is the presentation of one of the works selected by Adamo Antonacci, perhaps the one least known to the public at large, which is part of the Contemporary Art Collection at the Vatican Museums. It is the work painted in 1918 by Giuseppe Montanari, *The Kiss of Judas*, which is characterised by the unusual bottom-up perspective approach that distorts and accentuates the statuesque fixity of the figures, immobile in the moonlight, which – in the words of the artist himself – is not a romantic light, but "cold, geometrical, plastic, revelatory. It does not envelop. It splits and sets apart. Things become cubes. Men statues".

The comparison between painting and photography, perhaps better than any words, can tell of the secret and silent path traced in this project, in which the dialogue between past and present, between image-text and image-action, between painterly language and photographic language, finds a fertile and fundamental meeting ground in the experience of the sacred story.

Micol Forti
Curator of the exhibition and the
Contemporary Art Collection at the Vatican Museums